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Abstract

In this essay, Toni Bruce considers key cultural and social issues at play in the relationship between mediated sport and women. The treatment reflects on over 30 years of research and assesses not only central tendencies and changes in the way media covers women's sporting events and achievements but also considers how this coverage interplays with women's sense of their place in and relationship to sport. The essay opens with core arguments about the cultural importance of the communication and sport intermix. The second section reflects on the author's personal and scholarly journey with sport, touching on key themes and concerns in a gender- and sport-focused research agenda. The focus section "On Women and Femininities" considers diverse research from across the globe using different theoretical and methodological approaches. Highlighted in this section are research programs that illuminate the media's central tendencies in covering women's sports and the cultural and professional barriers to meaningful change. The closing section of the article focuses on the prospects for and challenges to change in the cultural discourses that media rely upon in framing understandings of women and sport.

Keywords

media, sport, gender, women, femininities, culture, journalism

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Why Communication and Sport Matters

Why does communicating *about*, *through*, and *in* sport matter? It is remotely possible that it does not; that sport presented in the media has no real impact on the world and can be safely ignored as mere male soap opera (Poynton & Hartley, 1990). However, there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons why we should pay attention to how the mainstream and increasingly web-based and social media talk about, write about, and visually represent sport.

For one thing, we are enveloped in mediasport, which is any sport not experienced in the space where it happens but represented through media. In today's globalized, corporatized sporting environment, mediasport is everywhere, almost inescapable in its multimediation, whether via the traditional mainstream media formats of radio, television, and newspapers or the increasing diversity of Internet-based options such as online news, live streaming video, blogs, tweets, YouTube, mobile phone apps, and sport and athlete websites.

Mediasport's popularity and global reach mean that its messages reach millions if not billions of people. Indeed, mediated sport is so popular that Rupert Murdoch has used it as a "battering ram" to increase pay television subscribers (Falcous, 2005, p. 994). Its messages are particularly important because the majority of coverage is located within the realm of *news* media, which is grounded in ideologies of objectivity, impartiality, and balance. This location may, in part, influence audiences' assumptions about the realness of mediasport, such as live television coverage "in which it is imagined the cameras are simply there recording a raw event as it occurs" (Bassett, 1984, p. 5). Thus, although researchers know that mediasport highlights particular sports and elements in line with dominant media and cultural discourses, it appears that both media workers and audiences may interpret it through much less critical eyes. Ironically, it is the apparently unmediated nature of mediasport that makes it such a potent site for naturalizing difference, especially in terms of key markers of identity such as gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and nationalism.

Another key reason why communication and sport matters is the theoretical argument that the media plays an important role in setting the boundaries within which people can make sense of their culture; telling them what to think *about* rather than exactly what to think (Hall, 1984). In the cultural studies theoretical tradition, for example, the argument is that the media does not directly affect behavior but slowly transforms what appear to be "the most plausible frameworks we have of telling ourselves a certain story about the world" (Hall, 1984, p. 8). And those stories can both unite and separate us. Mediasport provides resources for understanding who "we" are and who "they" are. It symbolically marks bodies and behaviors as normal or abnormal. What then results is a situation where "regardless of what is actually happening, it is the media's interpretation of that event that shapes our attitudes, values and perceptions about the world and about our culture" (Phillips, 1997, p. 20).

Mediasport does matter, precisely because its stories and images convey information about *who* and *what* matters, and *in what ways* they matter. This means that we need to understand what “stories” the media are telling us, and what vision of the sportsworld they are constructing and reconstructing.

My Journey With Communication and Sport

It continues to surprise me that it is possible to craft a career combining communication and sport. I started out in news journalism, aged 20, after a 6-month, full-time training course. At this stage, sport and communication were completely separate parts of my life. Although I played competitive basketball, my sport took place well beyond the media spotlight. In fact, basketball did not even feature on television. My journalism work focused on local government and I never imagined that I (or any woman for that matter) could be a sports journalist. The two did not coalesce until after I completed a physical education undergraduate degree and needed a job for 6 months before taking up a scholarship for further study overseas. As luck would have it—and I do not underestimate the role that luck has played—a sport journalist friend left the city newspaper and I talked my way into filling in while the editor looked for a long-term replacement. It helped that my “beats” would be basketball and netball; two sports I had played and where I already had good contacts. And I enjoyed the experience so much that it influenced my future academic career. Indeed, like many academics, I turned my passions—sport and journalism—into a research agenda, accompanied by occasional unpaid forays back into the sports media such as writing regular newspaper columns. The topic of women in sport became an important focus because my own sporting experiences had been marked by marginalization, not least in the public (mediated) realm, and I wanted to know why men’s sport was culturally valued and women’s sport was not.

Over the past 25 years, I have interrogated dominant cultural discourses, particularly as they marginalize or privilege different groups in mass-mediated sport. This has resulted in qualitative and quantitative analyses of media production, coverage, and consumption in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, France, and New Zealand. I have tried to understand how those who produce mediasport think about what they do, and what ideologies or discourses drive their decision making (e.g., Bruce, 2004, 2011; Desmarais & Bruce, 2008). I have explored the frustrations and challenges faced by female fans of mediated women’s sport (e.g., Bruce, 1998a) and by U.S. female sports reporters whose jobs take them into the sexually charged post-match interview environment of the elite male locker room (e.g., Bruce, 2001, 2002), as well as mapping the multidimensional and intersectional terrain of media-sport coverage of sportswomen (e.g., Bruce, 2008, 2009; Bruce, Hovden & Markula, 2010; Bruce & Wensing, 2012) and sportsmen (Bruce & Wheaton, 2009; Cosgrove & Bruce, 2005). More recently, I have investigated how the valorization of men’s sport acts to silence or marginalize those who are disinterested or actively resistant to it (Bruce, in press). I have tried to give voice to women’s viewpoints and

experiences via the creation of collective stories and ethnographic fiction (Bruce, 1998b, 2000, 2003). Increasingly, I am drawn to investigating alternative sites to mainstream media in which dominant discourses may be challenged, visibility increased, dominant understandings of gender disrupted, and alternative spaces for communities of fandom created and supported.

Focus: On Women and Femininities

Analyses of media coverage of women and femininities represent a significant body of interdisciplinary research spanning more than 30 years and many countries, and utilizing a range of different theoretical and methodological approaches. The bulk has been dedicated to content analyses and textual readings of media texts with a focus on how mediasport reproduces, legitimates, and occasionally challenges ideologies of gender. However, production and audience interpretation of mediasport remains an underdeveloped area.

Despite being framed by diverse methodological and theoretical approaches, research on gender provides ample evidence that mediasport is an overwhelmingly male and hegemonically masculine domain that produces coverage *by* men, *for* men and *about* men. More particularly, mediasport valorizes elite, able-bodied, heterosexual, and professional sportsmen, especially those who bring glory to the nation. Simultaneously it excludes, marginalizes, or trivializes athletes who do not fall into this narrow realm, such as sportswomen, veterans, amateurs, children, and sports unaligned to nationalism. Through its narratives and images, mediasport reinforces and amplifies the historical connection of sport to men and masculinity.

The representation of sport as the natural domain of men has ensured an ongoing concern with issues of gender in mediasport texts. An early and continuing liberal feminist focus on documenting the absence and trivialization of sportswomen has resulted in hundreds of analyses of media coverage of sportswomen and decades of ensuing activism by individuals, organizations, and government agencies. Yet, entrenched gender ideologies and dominant representations of sport have remained highly resistant to change. In everyday coverage, sportswomen still languish at around 10% of print media coverage and below 5% in broadcast media (see Bruce et al., 2010; Markula, 2009). A recent survey of 80 newspapers in 22 countries found that sportswomen were the main focus of only 9% of articles (Toft, 2011). Some years ago, a male colleague argued there was no need for more content analyses of women's sport. His point was that the ongoing trivialization and marginalization of women's sport was already well, if not excessively, documented. Yet in many ways, it is precisely the tedious documentation, the overwhelming evidence, that is important because it identifies ideologies and practices that appear to be transnational, to exceed historical, cultural, and geographical location, that point to a critical marking of sport as male territory. Graeme Turner has cogently described the consistency in findings as "a damning indictment of the institutionalized sexism of sports reporting" (1997, p. 298).

The liberal feminist emphasis on equality of coverage for women is balanced by a variety of critical, poststructuralist, and feminist positions interrogating the role of journalists and mediasport in the social construction of femininities, masculinities, and sexualities. Approaching mediasport from these perspectives identifies it as a site of culture thoroughly saturated in ideologies of gender that privilege men while sidelining women (whether as journalists, subjects of coverage, or audience members). Discourses of sport and masculinity combine to form an articulation that is not only extremely hard to disrupt but permeates the field so profoundly that it drives the decisions and actions of media workers. Indeed, research across a range of countries reveals the layered, subtle, and complex ways in which sport's assumed connection to masculinity plays "a decisive role" in producing coverage that "privileges men's sports . . . whilst simultaneously disenfranchising women's sports" (Claringbould, Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Lowes, 1999; Scott-Chapman, 2012, p. 204; Theberge & Cronk, 1986).

The major patterns of coverage comprise seven key techniques or unwritten rules (see Wensing & Bruce, 2003). They include *gender marking*, in which only the women's event is gender marked, constructing the male event as the norm. *Compulsory heterosexuality* leads to privileging sportswomen who fulfill heterosexual gender roles such as girlfriend, wife, or mother while simultaneously silencing lesbian identity, despite the widespread assumption that women participating in sports that embody physical strength, aggression, and physical contact may be lesbian (Lenskyj, 1998; Wright & Clarke, 1999). *Appropriate femininity* involves highlighting physical and emotional characteristics that mark women as different from men (such as small stature, concern for others, physical or emotional fragility, or weakness). *Infantilization* "tempers the symbolic threat posed by successful adult sportswomen" by representing them as nonthreatening "girls," as does focusing on *non-sport-related aspects* such as comparisons to male athletes, family or personal life, personality, physical appearance, or other aspects that suggest sport is secondary to other aspects (Wensing & Bruce, 2003, p. 388).

Sexualization represents sportswomen within discourses of idealized sexual attractiveness. Feminist researchers are torn about the apparent rise in popular and news media sexualization, especially in relation to sportswomen who actively exploit dominant discourses (often to their financial advantage) through appearing in popular cultural texts such as advertising and men's magazines. Feminists debate whether such images represent women in traditionally passive ways framed within a male gaze (Markula, 2009) or instead offer a "sense of expanded possibility" because sportswomen's bodies "when coded as athletic, can redeem female sexuality and make it visible as an assertion of female presence" (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. 83; Thorpe, 2011). Recent research suggests that sexualization may be context-specific, with New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey reporting that it is primarily athletes from outside the home nation who are sexualized (Bruce et al., 2010). Although sportswomen whose physical appearance meets definitions of ideal femininity often see no contradiction in *representing themselves* as pretty and

powerful, they rarely control images produced by the mainstream news media. Thus, there is ongoing concern about the effects of contradictory media messages resulting from the collision of discourses of athleticism and beauty.

Ambivalence, identified as a key media practice more than 20 years ago (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988), incorporates representations that oscillate between valorizing female sporting prowess and undermining or trivializing it (Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Arising out of male journalists' struggles to reconcile conflicting discourses of sport and of femininity (Scott-Chapman, 2012), ambivalence now appears to be the dominant framing technique.

This is not to argue that media workers actively or consciously try to marginalize women's sport. Rather, it is the discourses through which they construct knowledge that leads to shared understandings and practices that reinforce rather than challenge existing relations of power (see Schoch & Ohl, 2011). As Hall (1997) states, "it is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produce knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the discursive formation, the *régime of truth*, of a particular period and culture" (p. 55).

One myth that needs addressing is the claim that more women in sports journalism would create change. Evidence to date suggests that women journalists make little difference; a combination of their low numbers and the overwhelmingly "macho" habitus of sports journalism makes for complex negotiations for female journalists (Claringbould et al., 2004, p. 715; Scott-Chapman, 2012). Thus, although they may not be verbally or sexually harassed, female journalists experience "the more subtle feeling, both with athletes and colleagues, that they are not in the right place" (Schoch & Ohl, 2011, p. 204). Career-oriented women may adopt the male habitus, valuing, and striving to cover culturally valued men's sports, understanding that to proactively support women's sport is to limit their career aspirations (Bruce, 2002; Claringbould et al., 2004). Others accept the ghetto outside the "noble" sports in order to avoid tension and maintain working relationships with their male colleagues (Schoch & Ohl, 2011, p. 200). As Hardin and Shain (2005) argue, "the position of female sports journalists and female athletes is the same: Both are not male, and, as such, are not valued within the sport/media complex because they do not and can never meet the masculine standards on which it is built" (pp. 816–817).

When deciding what to highlight, sports journalists operate at the intersection of two powerful articulations (sport—masculinity and journalism—objectivity) that could be argued to limit their ability to recognize where gender bias exists in their decision-making (Bruce, 2011). Indeed, research reveals that male sports journalists believe they are gender neutral; an ideological position of objectivity that precludes "promotion" of those felt to be outside the norm (Hardin & Shain, 2005; Knoppers & Elling, 2004). Sports journalists' decisions appear to be based on historical precedent and tradition (thus privileging established male sports), anecdotal evidence and intuition (based on their own experiences and ideological beliefs rather than critical public feedback or research), and their belief that a predominantly male

audience is not interested in women's sport for its own sake (Fountaine & McGregor, 1999; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Lowes, 1999). Unsurprisingly then, it can be argued that rather than being gender neutral, many journalists are instead "gender blind(ed)" by intersecting sets of beliefs that "leave no other position for women than as 'different' and 'other', and women's sport as inferior and less interesting" (Bruce, 2011, p. 6).

In the second decade of the 21st century, it appears that it is increasingly accepted and valued for females to participate in sport but what they do *does not matter*. The mainstream mediasport message is "Go ahead and play but don't expect us to pay attention to your activities." Of course, there are rare exceptions, and it is to these that most people refer; the Olympic Games or certain world championships such as netball in New Zealand or handball in Norway (Bruce, 2008; von der Lippe, 2002). For example, during the Olympics, coverage often more than doubles, as discourses of nationalism override discourses of gender (Bruce et al., 2010). French colleagues call this *the Olympic Games effect*, arguing that the enhanced coverage is an artifact of the presence of cameras, journalists, and equipment that are already there to cover the men. In such events, "it is possible to represent women '*sans effort*' [without effort] because they are in the stadiums at the same time as men" (Quin, Wipf, & Ohl, 2010, p. 112). Yet, these occasional increases are mere raindrops compared to the deluge of male sport that inundates the sport mediascape on a daily basis. The result may be (as Geena Davis has argued about Hollywood movies) that "we are teaching girls to be happy about watching boys [and] boys that they don't have to watch stories about girls" (Davis, in Ryan, 2010). Given that media coverage teaches us who and what matters, it is clear that the sports media is sending a message to females and males that it is stories about men that are important.

One key research challenge that results from the overwhelming focus on content analysis of media texts is the often implicit and untheorized assumption that mediasport texts will have a direct influence on how people think about sportswomen and gender relations more broadly. This often-unaddressed theoretical assumption dates back to the emergence of research on media coverage of women in the 1970s when Gaye Tuchman critiqued researchers for being "mired in a naïve literalness" (1979, p. 531). Indeed, even now, despite both research and anecdotal evidence of the importance of mediasport in people's lives, there is little agreement about how it actually affects people's understandings of gender. However, the overwhelmingly male focus of mediasport appears to have three main influences on female audiences, all of which make it more difficult for many females to identify as fans and experience pleasure in their viewing. The first is an unwillingness to fully embrace the position of sports fan in relation to culturally valued men's sports (Brummett & Duncan, 1990; Star, 1992), which may reflect a reluctance on the part of males to acknowledge female knowledge or fandom as authentic. This response reflects Melnick and Jackson's (1998) argument that mediasport "present(s) an essentially male-skewed world ... one in which females have reason to wonder about their

social position and role” (p. 550). The second influence is a profound sense of alienation and frustration amongst female athletes and fans of women’s sport who have described themselves as “pissed off” and angry about absent, irregular, or ambivalent coverage (Bruce, 1998a, p. 385). Finally, it appears that both females and males come to accept mediasport as primarily a male domain (Griggs, Leflay, & Groves, 2012; Lines, 2000, 2002). Young people appear to be strongly influenced by the overwhelming focus on male sports: “Young people’s sports discourse revolves around men. They generally buy the bond between masculinity and sport. They virtually exclude sportswomen from their sports talk, legitimizing the sports field as essentially male” (Lines, 2002, p. 210). Even sportswomen are affected: One elite New Zealand athlete recently suggested this is “just the way it is” (Scott-Chapman, 2012, p. 287). This finding indicates that many audience members have indeed accepted the preferred meanings encoded by mediasport producers. Lines (2002) concluded that “talk about sports personalities offers boys close associations between masculinity, sport and physicality, affirming the ‘naturalness’ of their place in the sports world” (p. 212). Despite evidence suggesting that females are more likely to be fans of sports and events in which women participate (AAF & ESPN, 2001; Wenner & Gantz, 1989), the opportunity to affirm their place in sport is not as easily available to females because mediasport offers far fewer opportunities for them to see—and potentially identify with—athletes who are *like* them.

Looking Ahead for Communication and Sport Research

A generation of boys and young men in the West has grown up playing sport with and against females. But these young men and women are not in power in the media, at least not yet. Will their generation herald changes in expectations about female physicality that will translate into shifts in the news value of women’s sport? At this point, my best guess is no. The culture and discourses that inform mainstream sports journalism are so embedded that it is difficult to see how things might change. It appears more likely that disruptions will come from media forms other than sports news or live sport (see Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Thorpe, 2011). In terms of the mainstream sports media, the question remains whether and how the articulation of sport and masculinity can be disrupted on an everyday, long-term basis.

Is change possible? Yes. As Stuart Hall has argued, there is no necessary correspondence between ideological elements (such as sport and masculinity); they are always “connected through a specific linkage, that can be broken” (in Grossberg, 1996, p. 141).

Is it likely? Not until broader cultural and journalism discourses shift sufficiently to shake up the articulation of sport and masculinity. Too much appears to be at stake for women to be freely welcomed in the mediasport sphere; a sphere in which each culture tells itself *what* and *who* really counts. Mediasport representations, like gender relations, are inherently relations of power. And what mainstream sports news does is mark the boundaries of sport as male territory by

sidelining sportswomen. When women are represented, their activities are filtered through a male gaze that struggles to reconcile discourses of sport and discourses of femininity.

Mediasport is not an innocent player in society—the ideologies, attitudes, and values that are present in mediasport production powerfully shape our understandings of ourselves and of others. As a result, I want to suggest that a future research agenda might be to investigate spaces of interruption to mainstream media narratives and their (possible) effects. Such an approach would mean moving beyond the documentation of marginalization, sexualization, trivialization, and ambivalence to actively incorporate a focus on media sites of change, of creative representations of gender, of individuals who are making a difference, of places such as social media where visibility for women's sport is being created and fan communities established that have been invisible in the mainstream press (Bruce, 2011). As Marie Hardin points out:

Social media and the Internet . . . have eroded the institutional barriers traditionally blamed for putting women on the sidelines. Now, anyone (male or female) can become a journalist with a step as simple as starting a blog. Thanks to social networking, fans of women's sports can find one another, join forces, and promote their favorite athletes and teams. With new media, then, it could be argued that many the barriers to fair, equitable and positive attention to women's sports have come down. (2009, ¶ 5)

Certainly, some professional sportswomen have succeeded in attracting fans, garnering social media followings as high as 8.8 million on Facebook and almost 3.3 million on Twitter (Fan Page List, 2012). Such followings can “prove” interest to mainstream media gatekeepers, who are increasingly turning to new media formats as sources of news (Lowrey & Mackay, 2008). But new media is not a panacea. It remains dominated by male athletes and men's sport, and bloggers/tweeters/facebookers are not limited by public decency standards like the mainstream media. As a result, commentary often further entrenches rather than challenges existing gender ideologies. Blogs about females in sport are “often belittling and sexist and . . . sometimes cruel” (Hardin, 2009, ¶ 6). Yet, new media does offer women's sports the chance to control their own content and engage the passion of their fans, creating communities of interest well beyond national boundaries. As I have argued elsewhere (Bruce, 2011), by researching and highlighting cases where this does occur, feminist researchers may contribute to the agonizingly slow process of disrupting the articulations that have long kept sportswomen on the mainstream media margins.

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